

Rediscovered Gems

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Christie Zimmerman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Christie" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Zimmerman".

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Abstract

"The time to sing is when your emotional level is too high to just speak anymore, and the time to dance is when your emotions are just too strong to only sing about how you feel." – Bob Fosse

Fosse's statement provides us with the epitome of musical theatre dance. The beauty of musical theatre is that it involves ultimate multi-tasking incorporating singing, dancing, and acting all in one performance of honesty and truth. For the purposes of this thesis, we shall focus on the dance aspect of musical theatre performance. There is something so unique in every individual's movement, and so much can be told without needing to express words.

Rediscovered Gems is exactly that; a way to pay tribute to the pioneers of the past and the hopes of focusing on the development of the future. These eight routines take a trip through the established history whilst living in the present. I think of it as my way of honoring the legacy that has been left in hopes of becoming an integral part of the future of musical theatre dance.

Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank my family, the Fab Five, the Diva Den and the numerous dance teachers of my past that have pushed me to be the dancer, teacher, leader, choreographer, and person that I am today.

Introduction

“Step, kick, kick, leap, kick, touch, again...” *A Chorus Line* opened at The Public Theatre off Broadway in 1975 to rave reviews where it ran for almost fifteen years (Green 243). This musical tells the stories of chorus dancers, also known as “gypsies”, as they audition for a Broadway show. The entire musical takes place within the audition setting as each individual character recalls their life experience through story, song, and dance. What makes this particular musical so important is that we see the life of a dancer from the dancer’s perspective. This musical brought to life a new understanding of the Broadway performer and the individuals involved in musical theatre as it has been established today. The stories portrayed in *A Chorus Line* mirror the role dance has played in my life as a musical theatre performer. This history and appreciation of the art form is what brought me to culminate the experiences I have had with dance, particularly in the musical theatre genre, into a choreography project of my own creation (*Every Little Step*).

In choosing my routines, I turned to choreographers who have had a great influence in my life and in my own work. I then looked for a specific musical theatre piece either of their creation, or of a similar style and reworked it into a rediscovered approach from my perspective. My hope was to showcase a smart variety of musical theatre choreography that not only spanned different eras and styles of musical theatre, but also suited the chorus of dancers I utilized as performers.

Casting and Creativity

I found differing sets of benefits and challenges in working with other members of the Musical Theatre Option at Ball State University. I did my best to select a small number of students from each class in the program so that I could give them a new experience in dance

while simultaneously challenging myself to work with different levels of technique and performance. It was a tricky experience balancing the strengths of the dancers with the choreographic and stylistic demands of the movement. After careful thought, I made specific choices that I felt fully considered both the performers and the choreography, while keeping the integrity of the show at the forefront. All in all, I found my ability to balance all of these elements to specific routines to be a success. One by one, I selected my pieces and began working with my dancers to put together a versatile show.

“Too Darn Hot”

For my opening routine, I wanted to go back to my roots and choose a routine and a style with which I had plenty of familiarity. My selection for my opening routine was “Too Darn Hot” from the musical *Kiss Me, Kate*. With music and lyrics by Cole Porter, *Kiss Me, Kate* opened on Broadway in 1948 and has since been known as a Porter classic (Green 141). The original choreographer for the production was Honya Holm, who was known for her modern dance technique and her prestigious tutorship under modern dance innovator, Martha Graham (Tracy 17).

After the success of the first production, a film version of the musical was made in 1953 starring Kathryn Grayson, Ann Miller, and featured company dancer, Bob Fosse (Green 141). As a side note, this film was one of the first big moments towards Fosse’s establishment as a choreographer. Hermes Pan, who was the actual choreographer for the film, asked Fosse to develop his own choreography for the number “From This Moment On”, which he performed in the film alongside Carol Haney. This number seriously introduced Fosse into the musical theatre dance world (Gottfried 76).

The musical was revived on Broadway in 1999 with this version co-choreographed by Kathleen Marshall and Rob Ashford (Green 315). This production had more of an upbeat and accentuated rhythm to it. Some of the music was re-orchestrated to make it more appealing to contemporary audiences. These re-orchestrations also provided a greater range of musical accentuations for the choreography, and so I chose to use this recording of the song for my presentation. I took great influence from the upbeat and rousing dance style of Twyla Tharp. Tharp has choreographed huge dance shows such as *Movin' Out* and *Come Fly With Me*, both of which require great athleticism and musicality from the dancers (World Bibliography). I also drew greatly from Bob Fosse, incorporating isolated accents and dynamic musicality, which are pure characteristics of the Fosse style. A final inspiration was choreographer Kathleen Marshall, who uses many technical elements in her choreography and direction. In addition to choreographing the 1999 revival of *Kiss Me, Kate*, Marshall has also choreographed shows such as *Little Shop of Horrors*, *The Pajama Game*, and the current revival of *Anything Goes* (Green 341). Combining these choreographic elements of athleticism, musicality, dynamics, and technique, I crafted a punch-packed jazz style for the opening routine incorporating three men and three women, which lent itself well to jumpstarting the show.

Juxtaposed Roles of Females in Musical Theatre

Since the history of musical theatre dance is rooted in classic vaudevillian settings, I wanted to look at a comparison between portrayals of women within musical theatre dance performance. I chose two musical theatre pieces that occur within similar settings in their respective shows – as “productions within a production”. The first piece is “Bushel and a Peck” from the 1950 Broadway musical *Guys and Dolls*, which portrays the style and characteristics of vaudevillian chorus girls (Green 148). The second piece for comparison is “That Terrific

Rainbow” from the 1940 Broadway musical *Pal Joey*, which portrays the style and characteristics of a raunchier burlesque style of performance (Green 112).

Guys and Dolls made its place in musical theatre history as a classic staple within the golden age of musicals. Michael Kidd was the choreographer for the original 1950 production which earned him his second Tony Award for Best Choreography after his 1947 win for his work on *Finian’s Rainbow*. After the initial success of the original Broadway production of *Guys and Dolls*, a film version was created in 1955 starring Marlon Brando and Frank Sinatra as the two male leads (Green 148). Since then, there have been numerous revivals of the show that have brought in consistent crowds and pegged this musical as a success story.

Comic female lead, Adelaide, is a performer in a nightclub and this number is her energetic and flirtatious introduction to the audience. For this piece, I drew inspiration from choreographer Tommy Tune, who is well known for his hugely energetic routines. His work typically incorporates large group numbers that feature classic dance styles such as the Charleston. For reference, I viewed classic numbers such as “Kickin’ the Clouds Away” from the 1983 Broadway production *My One and Only* starring Tommy Tune and British crossover star, Twiggy (Green 264). I had observed this routine multiple times throughout my college career and responded positively to its bubbly choreography and energetic-to-the-point-of-neurotics dancing girls, and it was this innocent energy that I was hoping to portray with the piece I created for three women.

To juxtapose this friendly and youthful innocence, I wanted to represent the other side of vaudeville; the burlesque club performance. *Pal Joey* is an original show written by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart with Robert Alton as the choreographer. This production also was met with great initial success. As with the precious musicals discussed, it was turned into a film in

1957, starring Frank Sinatra. The film utilized Hermes Pan as choreographer with Bob Fosse serving as an assistant (Green 112).

It seemed like a natural step to utilize some of Fosse's other work as choreographic inspiration for my interpretation of this piece. The specific number that I drew inspiration from is Fosse's "Mein Herr" from the movie *Cabaret*, specifically Fosse's use of chairs as props and the small, detailed and isolated movement that pulls an audience's focus so cleanly from one performer to the next (Green 219). A more recent innovator, Rob Marshall, was another choreographic inspiration for the routine "That Terrific Rainbow". He is most widely known for his direction and choreography of the recent movie musicals *Chicago* and *Nine*. His work on these productions demonstrated strength and sexuality in both its creation and performance (Green 312).

Weaving these choreographic elements of strength, sexuality, and detailed isolation together allowed me to create a rendition of "That Terrific Rainbow" that personified the burlesque club performer, and it was that juxtaposition of sex appeal and the energetic innocence of "Bushel and a Peck" that I focused on presenting with these two all female numbers.

"Moses Supposes"

On a personal note, I have always had a special love for tap dancing, and I have always been able to pick up tap choreography and rhythms fairly quickly. For this reason, classic tap musicals, particularly ones starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie, have often left me wishing that I could travel back in time and find myself tapping alongside the greats. The classic movie musical genre exploded about after the initial "talkie" *The Jazz Singer*, starring New York theatre star Al Jolson, was released in 1927 (*Broadway: The American Musical*). This film revolutionized the musical theatre world, making the collaboration between Hollywood and

Broadway a necessity, with Hollywood dominating this relationship in the end. Out of this collaboration came a new breed of musical theatre dancers. Aside from the previously mentioned Astaire and Rogers, dancers such as Cyd Charisse, Ann Miller, and Vera Ellen became huge stars (*Broadway: The American Musical*).

Another of this same breed was tap-dancing fiend, Gene Kelly, who crafted a style that was uniquely his own. His stockier build contrasted the long and lean, coattail wearing grace of Fred Astaire, but Kelly still managed a grace of his own. He became a solid force in the dance world as a director/choreographer extraordinaire. One of his most recognizable projects is the 1952 film, *Singin' In the Rain*. Kelly starred alongside other film moguls Donald O'Connor and Debbie Reynolds (*Gene Kelly: An American Life*).

I chose to present the tap duet "Moses Supposes" from *Singin' In the Rain* to represent this time period of fun, easy-going movie musicals. Traditionally, two men, Kelly and O'Connor perform this routine, but I chose to perform the piece myself with fellow dancer, Anthony Sullivan, creating a male/female duet. (*Gene Kelly: An American Life*) Another challenge I set for myself with the number was trying to strike a balance between maintaining a great deal of the original choreography while adding my own style to it. In the end, I chose to stay fairly true to the original Kelly choreography because of the tap accents in the musical accompaniment that truly must be present in the choreography. I spent more time learning and rehearsing this piece than with many of the other routines in the project. It was challenging to create perfectly synchronized tap sounds and steps, particularly because the choreography is very intricate and performed at lightening speed. In spite of these challenges, I found the greatest joy working on this particular piece, and in the end, I was able to produce a successful representation of that classic era and the showmanship that went along with it.

Fosse and Liza

There was a moment in time while developing my thesis proposal that I had considered concentrating solely on Bob Fosse alone. His work speaks to me so closely not just as a dancer and choreographer, but his life story also provides tremendous inspiration to me as an artist. He was such an innovator in the world of jazz dance, and as such, much of my past work has been influenced by Fosse's work on one way or another. He had an early start performing as a dancer, but struggled with having anatomical challenges that were considered a disadvantage for dancers. However, these imperfections led him to develop his own character of movement as a way to hide his insecurities. Inversions, exaggerated hunched shoulders and bowler hats can all be attributed to Fosse's attempts to cover up his weaknesses in the world of dance. (McWaters 27)

In 1954, Fosse was given his first major opportunity as choreographer for George Abbott's production of the new musical *The Pajama Game* (Green 161). The success of this musical skyrocketed Fosse to the top of creative choreographers and so began his legacy. Throughout his career, Fosse has choreographed and directed countless musicals and productions including *Sweet Charity*, *Chicago*, *Cabaret*, *Damn Yankees*, and *Pippin*, along with many others (Green 167, 216, 219, 236, 244). In 1973, Fosse was the first director/choreographer to win the "Triple Crown" of artistic awards. He won the Tony Award for Best Direction of his Broadway musical, *Pippin*, as well as won the Oscar for Best Direction for the film version of the musical *Cabaret*, which Fosse did the choreography for when it was originally a musical for the stage in 1966. The final award he received to complete the trifecta was the Emmy Award for Best Direction of the NBC Television Special *Liza With a "Z"* starring Liza Minnelli (Grubb 269).

Liza Minnelli became one of Fosse's staple performers, after starring in his award winning film, *Cabaret* (Grubb 277). In 1972, Fred Ebb, John Kander, and Bob Fosse all developed and produced a concert film starring classic hits from the musicals they had worked on together, as well as a few original pieces for the concert, and it was all centered around Liza (Gottfried 277). One of the original pieces created specifically for the filmed concert was the trio of "I Gotcha" starring Liza alongside two male dancers, and I chose to recreate this piece as my representation of Fosse and his influence on my dance life (*Liza with a Z*).

The entire piece was originally choreographed according to the 70 s musical accents so prevalent in the accompaniment. Along with the accentuations, the movements are very specific and tight and also contain severe isolations of all joint regions. Considering the span of Fosse's work, I chose a piece that was not as familiar to musical theatre audiences as some of his other work. What truly resonates with me as a choreographer and dancer is that no external influences can be seen on this work – it is pure Fosse and a style of dance that no one else was creating. As such I thought it would be a wonderful challenge to attempt to recreate this piece from my own choreographic perspective. I maintained the original framework of the piece and stayed true to the choreography while layering my own energetic and performative style on this existing framework. The choreographic and rehearsal process involved much experimentation and a quality of movement that the performers had little experience with, and in the end, I feel I captured the essence of Fosse and the choreographic style that is so specific to him.

"Mean To Me"

For this next piece I chose to create a completely original concept where I could allow my own choreographic style serve as the influence for the movement I created. I had first heard the song "Mean to Me" from *Ain't Misbehavin'* while doing research for my vocal technique

studies. My voice coach, Jodi Cotton had suggested that I listen to work by performer Nell Carter, and through that research, I came upon this song. The show *Ain't Misbehavin'* is a 1978 Broadway musical revue of Fats Waller music meant to commemorate black musicians of the 1920's and 30's. The selections are fashioned to capture the different moods of the Harlem Renaissance era and the abundance of cultural revolution during that time. The original concept of the show does not contain much of a dance component, and lyricist Richard Maltby, Jr, along with Arthur Faria, did the limited original choreography and staging for the production (Green 251).

In listening to this powerful ballad, traditionally performed by a solo woman onstage, singing the song to herself, I found something so simple and haunting. Having come from a dance background, I felt that this song would suit itself to beautiful contemporary choreography, and using my experience with this style of movement, I developed a lyrical piece to this song. My choreographic vision included the singer sitting, as she does in the production, but in the background a single dancer comes on and moves through the thoughts and emotions of the song through dance, accentuating the lyrics the audience hears. I imagined this addition, not as a detraction from the singer's performance, but rather to enhance it and add an even deeper element of portrayal. Anna Scharer, the dancer I chose to perform the piece, executed this vision just as I had imagined. Her movement was simple, controlled, and came from within her. For choreographic inspiration, I turned to Honya Holm, as well as George Balanchine. Holm, as was mentioned earlier in reference to *Kiss Me, Kate*, was trained in modern dance styles (Tracy 17), and Balanchine came from a ballet background (Driver 154-156). I sought to fuse these two styles of movement that are rooted from within the individual to create a piece that could represent more than just dancing, but a complete feeling and release through movement. This

particular piece was well received by the audience in attendance of the performance and turned out to be one of the pieces that meant the most to me.

“Buenos Aires”

One of the most exciting numbers to work on and conceive was “Buenos Aires” from *Evita*. This was the largest number in the entire presentation, utilizing nine dancers and four minutes of choreography. I chose this routine because I wanted to include a piece that had a Latin style incorporated into the choreography. Like *A Chorus Line*, another significant show for musical theatre dance is the 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story*. The very honest, pedestrian portrayal of movement utilized in the show incorporated a great amount of technical difficulty and took musical theatre dance, and choreographer Jerome Robbins, to a new level (Green 175). Being that my goal for this project was to find some less popular pieces to rediscover, I decided not to go with the well known numbers of *West Side Story*, but to find another musical of a very similar style and flavor - *Evita*.

Originally a 1976 rock opera concept album written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, *Evita* took the stage at the West End in 1978. This musical was met with success and the British production invaded Broadway in 1979 with Patti LuPone starring as Eva Peron and Mandy Patinkin starring as Che. Both original productions were directed by Harold Prince and choreographed by Larry Fuller. After a four year-run the show closed, but the historical and theatrical legacy continued. For instance, the average person may not be familiar with the stage version of the show, but there also was a film version of the musical released in 1996 with Madonna starring as Eva Peron and Antonio Banderas starring as Che (Green 254).

There have been numerous revivals of this show all over the world, but the two most recent revivals were in 2006 and in present day. In 2006, the West End did a revival

choreographed by Rob Ashford and starring Elena Roger as Eva Peron. This same production has relocated to present day Broadway with the same production team, the same Eva Peron, and the addition of Ricky Martin as Che. It is this version of the song “Buenos Aires” that I ultimately chose for my project. This particular version has an extended dance break and the orchestrations contain heavy influences from Latin music. Rob Ashford’s choreography is extremely energetic and brings a great life and vibrancy to the song and its story (Green 325). In my interpretation of this piece, I wanted to push the limits of my performers even further by demanding more technique and versatility from them, and so I chose to fuse some of the choreographic ideals from the newest revival with the classic innovational discoveries made by Robbins.

This piece utilized the most time in terms of preparation and conception than any of the other pieces because of the number of dancers I needed to maneuver through the space and the variety of choreography I wanted to use. This piece was a big crowd-pleaser as well because of its energetic and chaotic nature. My goal was to create the feeling that the dancers were moving through the streets of Argentina, rather than performing a prepared dance piece that did not contribute to the story of the show. In retrospect, I would have liked more rehearsal time to polish the choreography and the formations, as well as revise parts of the piece, but in the end, I was happy with the way it turned out and I think the piece was executed strongly.

“Music and the Mirror”

The final number of the presentation was “Music and the Mirror” from *A Chorus Line*. This number is the epitome of my experiences as a musical theatre dancer and performer and the primary reason that I developed this project as my honors thesis. As previously mentioned, *A Chorus Line* is the telling of the lives of individual chorus dancers. The show was conceived

from workshops where approximately eight dancers were brought in to talk about their life experience and what dancing meant to them. These testimonies were the inspiration for the characters within the musical (*Every Little Step*). Together with writers James Kirkwood and Nicholas Drake, composer Marvin Hamlisch, and lyricist Edward Kleban, director Michael Bennett finished the development of a show that still holds the title as the fifth longest-running show on Broadway (Green 243)

The piece, “Music and the Mirror”, is performed by the character of Cassie. Cassie is a more seasoned dancer in the show. Her backstory involves her finding success in New York as a featured dancer and then leaving to try her luck in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, she does not achieve this same success in Hollywood and she has returned to New York in hopes of rebuilding her life on the stage. The director of the show that she is auditioning for happens to be an old flame of hers, which only adds to the intensity of her story. The important message from her story, and from this song, is that she needs to be dancing, that it is the very essence of not just what she does, but who she is. The song is about fighting for the need to dance, and that is precisely what she does, and what I in turn attempted to do with this presentation. (*Every Little Step*)

In Conclusion

I thought this would be the perfect piece to bring my project, and my time here at Ball State, to a close. In these past seventeen years I have developed such a love and need for dance. Whether it be performing, choreographing, or teaching, I know that dance will always be a part of my life. I will act as Cassie in every capacity I can to ensure that I will always be able to dance. In these past four years at college, I have grown to find out what is most important in my life and what strong beliefs I will defend. This showcase was my way of working through my

journey as an artist, as well as my way to further develop my understanding of the craft of musical theatre dance. I wanted to take a look at the history that brought us to this point and the legacy that must be upheld and rediscovered by the next generation's development of brand new gems. My only desire is to continue to grow so that I may be an integral part of that new step of discovery.

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